Marching for Racial Justice in Cont

BY ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

Congressman John L. Lewis, who is the sole surviving speaker of the 1963 March on Washington, maintains that while we have come a long way since that famous day 50 years ago, we still have a long way to go to achieve racial justice in this land. “There is a lot of pain, a lot of hurt in America,” he recently said. Too many current events, he added, “remind us of our dark past.” If we are going to contend with our dark past and achieve racial justice in this land, we will enforce universal voting rights; end racial profiling; dismantle the “cradle to prison” pipeline; and achieve racial justice in this land, we will refuse to allow the system to maintain itself—and so widespread. It is listed first in the beatitudes of Jesus when he declares, “I was hungry and you fed me.” The Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council cast the hunger reality and our response in the light of early Church teaching in these words: “Today the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance.”

Consideration of hunger in Catholic social thought begins with the concept of human rights articulated, for example, by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical Pacem in Terris in 1963. There, Pope John grounded human rights in the principle that “every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will” and “because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature.” These rights, the pope continued, are universal and indivisible.

Pope John then began his enumeration of human rights: “Man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services.” While the pope also laid out rights pertaining to a worthy standard of living, moral and cultural values, worship, choosing a state of life, economic and political life, immigration, and association, he began with food.

The right to food tops the list of rights because hunger is such a fundamental assault on human life itself—and so widespread. It is listed first in the beatitudes of Jesus when he declares, “I was hungry and you fed me.” The Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council cast the hunger reality and our response in the light of early Church teaching in these words: “Today the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance.”

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—Pope Paul VI, Populorum Progressio, 1967, no. 3

ENDNOTES

1 Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris [Peace in Earth], 1963, no. 9.
2 Ibid., no. 11.
3 Matthew 25:35.
4 Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes [The Church in the Modern World], 1965, no. 69.
5 Pope Paul VI, Populorum Progressio [On the Development of Peoples], 1967, no. 5.
7 Ibid., no. 27 (emphasis in original).
Ironically, instead of applauding SNAP’s participation by the number of families living in poverty and meeting basic food needs for millions of hungry families, some policy makers have reacted to the growth of SNAP over the years by making more and more hungry people ineligible. Those efforts have included the following:

- In 1996, under so-called welfare reform, a House amendment limited food stamps to only three months out of the three years for unemployed people between the ages of 18 and 50 who were not raising minor children. Any month in which a person was not employed or in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week would count against the three-month limit, and after three months of receiving benefits, a person would be ineligible for the next three months.

- The 1996 law also removed SNAP eligibility for most lawfully present non-citizens. (Undocumented persons have never been eligible for food stamps or SNAP.) Laws enacted in 1998 and 2002 restored eligibility to certain lawfully present non-citizens, including children, persons receiving disability benefits, and those here for five years.

- In June 2013, the House Agriculture Committee proposed drastic cuts to SNAP by more than $20 billion over the coming decade—nearly all of it coming from ending or cutting benefits for low-income families and individuals. The bill would have knocked nearly 2 million people off SNAP, primarily those in low-income working families and elderly individuals. Some workingpoor families would be cut, administratively they would lose a modest car needed to get to work. Hundreds of thousands of other poor recipients would see their benefits reduced.

- If that were not enough, when the committee’s bill came to the House floor, lawmakers added one of the most extreme SNAP measures in history. It would allow states to end benefits to large numbers of low-income who want a job but cannot find one and to keep the savings to use for any purpose state politicians want, including cuts for plugging holes in state budgets.

- Then, on September 16, the House Republican leadership introduced a bill to combine $20.5 billion in cuts over ten years from the unsuccessful June bill with an additional $19 billion dollar set of cuts by ending state waivers under the 1996 welfare law that had allowed states to suspend the three-month cutoff in localities with high unemployment or insufficient jobs. The bill’s $39 billion dollar savings could cut SNAP benefits to 3.9 million people in 2014 and an additional 3 million people each year of the following decade. These include some of our most destitute adults, as well as many low-income children, elders, and poor “working” families.

- On November 1, 2013, an across-the-board SNAP benefit cut for more than 47 million Americans, including 16 million children, will take effect. For instance, every family of four receiving SNAP will see its benefit cut $36 a month or about $420 for the rest of the fiscal year.

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